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ABSTRACT

To move composition research forward into the 21st century, research conducted at the National Center for the Study of Writing and Literacy will benefit by continuing to be inclusive--of a diverse population of learners, taught by a diverse population of teachers, using approaches that allow for a diversity of ways of learning. The initial theory underlying the Center's research program was a socio-cognitive theory of writing based on the work of L. S. Vygotsky. Using a Vygotskian theoretical frame, the Center in 1985 conducted a study that compared learning to write in inner city schools in the United States and Great Britain. In the end, Vygotsky's concept of social interaction proved much too general to account for the teaching and learning of writing. By 1990, the Center had expanded its notions of social processes and social interaction to give greater consideration to the cultural meaning of students' experiences. A current project explores the dynamics of learning to write and writing to learn in urban multicultural classrooms. The project involves a national collaboration with teachers who work with Center personnel to conduct research in their own classrooms. The Center's sociocultural frame is proving particularly important in helping researchers understand the needs of ethnically and socioeconomically diverse populations of learners. (Contains 13 references.) (RS)

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Moving Writing Research into the 21st Century

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> [T]he challenge that has always faced American education, that it has sometimes denied and sometimes doggedly pursued, is how to create both the social and cognitive means to enable a diverse citizenry to develop their ability. It is an astounding challenge: the complex and wrenching struggle to actualize the potential not only of the privileged but, too, of those who have lived here for a long time generating a culture outside the mainstream and those who ... immigrated with cultural traditions of their own. This painful but generative mix of language and story can result in clash and dislocation in our communities, but it also gives rise to new speech, new stories, and once we appreciate the richness of it, new invitations to literacy. (Rose, 1989, pp. 225-6)

The challenge that Mike Rose poses for American education in his 1989 book, *Lives on the Boundary*, is that we "enable a diverse citizenry to develop their ability" through issuing "new invitations to literacy." This is the same challenge that drives the research program of the National Center for the Study of Writing and Literacy and the challenge that I predict will remain with us into the 21st century. To begin to meet this challenge, we at the Center have assumed that, given the scope and complexity of the issues, new knowledge about learning to write and read has to be generated from many sources—from formal university-based research studies, from classroom-based teacher research, from university-school and workplace collaborations. We also have assumed that we would need the insights and expertise of our diverse citizens—looking through the eyes of learners as well as educators and community members—all representing the mix of cultures that make up our populace. And we have assumed that we would need the insights and expertise of university-based researchers across disciplines who themselves represent the diversity of our citizenry. We feel strongly that maximal

progress will be made through gathering, synthesizing, and constructing new knowledge—from varied sources, taking varied methodological approaches and using varied research paradigms. Overall, our research program aims to be inclusive rather than exclusive. To move composition research forward into the 21st century, I believe that our research will benefit by continuing to be inclusive—of a diverse population of learners, taught by a diverse population of teachers, using approaches that allow for a diversity of ways of learning—with new knowledge gathered from diverse sources and with diverse methods. Along with Carol Berkenkotter, Deborah Brandt, Stuart Greene, and Stephen Witte, we at the Center worry about arguments that divide the field into camps and that we think ultimately serve to keep thoughtful and committed people from finding common ground (see Flower, 1989).

The theory that frames current Center research helps us examine issues of diversity. I will begin by presenting the initial theoretical frame for the Center's research and will show how my own research on learning to write in inner city schools in the United States and in Great Britain was guided by that theory. In the process I will show how specific research on the learning of diverse populations pushes us to elaborate existing theories to account more specifically for how writing is learned across varied populations. Finally, I will explain the influence of such theory-building on my continuing research on inner-city secondary students in the United States.

We set forth the initial theory underlying the Center's research program in 1985, as part of the mission statement for the Center for the Study of Writing. At that time, we suggested "a social-cognitive theory of writing" (Freedman, Dyson, Flower, & Chafe, 1987). Consistent with our desire to be inclusive of varied research approaches, of varied paradigms, our goal was to bring together two strands of research on writing—studies of individual cognitive processes that dominated the research of the 1970s and studies of the immediate social contexts surrounding those processes that emerged in the 1980s. In her 1989 article in *College Composition and Communication*, Linda Flower argued that this integrated theory "can explain how context cues cognition, which in its turn mediates and interprets the particular world that context provides" (p. 282). Pushing further still, Center research has gone on to examine specifically how writers, from early childhood through adulthood, form *social* relationships with teachers and peers in ways that shape their

learning and become part of their individual thinking, their *cognition*. This social-cognitive theory is based on Vygotsky's (1978) notion that "human learning presupposes a specific social nature and a process by which children grow into the intellectual life of those around them" (p. 88). To explain this process of learning and development, Vygotsky uses the metaphor of "buds" or "flowers" which, with assistance, will "fruit" into independent accomplishments (p. 86). It is these "buds" or "flowers" that Vygotsky claims need to be nourished in the classroom. Vygotsky's theory of learning and development explains that these interactions occur within "the zone of proximal development": *"the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers"* (p. 86). The implication of Vygotsky's theory is that in order to learn to write, students need to be engaged in social interactions that center around aspects of the task of writing that they cannot accomplish alone but that they can accomplish with assistance. Vygotsky's theory, explaining the intimate relationship between social interaction and learning, guided our studies of the socially interactive nature of the learning process and helped us begin to tie our findings to the learner's intellectual processes.

For example, using this Vygotskian theoretical frame, in 1985 I designed a study with Alex McLeod at the University of London's Institute of Education. We worked in collaboration with British and U.S. secondary teachers. Taking seriously the Center's focus on diversity, our goal was to compare learning to write in inner city schools in the U.S. and Great Britain. The schools enrolled students from multiple cultural groups, but most were working class. In both countries the study began with national surveys completed by teachers across grade levels and their students at the secondary level. Then to get a closer look inside classrooms, Alex and I worked with the collaborating teachers to develop a year-long curriculum that would involve students in a cross-national writing exchange. In all there were eight classes, four in the San Francisco Bay Area paired with four in the greater London area. The classes included grades six through nine, the equivalent of what was then called Forms 1 through 4 in Britain.

For the exchanges, the two teachers in each pair worked together to coordinate their curricula, so that their students were doing roughly the same

kinds of writing at the same time. Although students sent personal letters back and forth, the main focus of these exchanges was on major and substantive pieces—autobiographies, books about school and community life, opinion essays, essays about literature.

The exchange activity promoted a great deal of Vygotskian social interaction, both across countries as the students, teachers, and researchers became involved in the exchanges, and within the classrooms in each country among students and between the teacher and the students. The teachers in each country also interacted with each other and with the research teams. This rich field for social interaction provided many opportunities for students to learn literacy skills, and many opportunities for teachers, students, and researchers to learn about the other country. The oral nature of much of the social interaction rendered much of this learning visible.

We chose eight teachers whose classroom practices seemed consistent with Vygotsky's theories, but we found striking differences across the classrooms. The first major difference surfaced first in the national questionnaires. When asked what made them successful, the British teachers focused their attention on understanding their students' development. They talked about nurturing their students' creativity, focusing on their meaning-making, and helping them write in a variety of ways. The following comment is typical:

> I'm interested in and responsive to the individuality of pupils' creative work. I'm excited by language and I'm reasonably fertile in suggestions which can open new directions from what pupils spontaneously produce without making them feel that their work is being taken over by an alien sensibility.

By contrast, the U.S. teachers were more inclined to focus on creating innovative activities for the curriculum. A typical U.S. secondary teacher wrote:

> I think of myself as a writer. I emphasize the writing process rather than the product.... I write with my students when we write in journals. We use peer writing groups when students are competent enough to be successful with them.

The writing exchanges highlighted these contrasts and showed other differences as well. The British teachers, unless they were preparing students for national examinations, had a consistent theoretical orientation that guided their teaching. Their theory was built to accommodate mixed-ability,

multi-ethnic classes. Specifically, a major part of social interaction in their classrooms involved the teachers in negotiating the curriculum with their students inside their classrooms. The teachers and students worked together to decide on writing activities. The British teachers set motivating contexts for a particular group of students while understanding that not all their students would be motivated by the same activity. However, the teachers felt that if they were successful in collaborating with the class on topic selection and on motivating the activity, the unmotivated students would be in the minority. When a student was not motivated, these British teachers took it as their responsibility to help that student find something more motivating to do. Students experienced no stigma if they chose a different activity.

Just before the exchange year, British teacher Peter Ross took a study leave to attend the Summer Invitational Program of the Bay Area Writing Project (BAWP) and meet with U.S. teachers. During this time he felt a marked difference between his sense of curriculum creation and what he observed in the United States. His sense of difference was confirmed through his experiences with his exchange partner, Nancy Hughes, and her class. During his study leave, Peter was surprised by the BAWP teachers' focus on their successful classroom practices as models: "They all seemed to be program models as to ... how you take it from me and ... use it in your classroom ... I couldn't do that 'cause I don't offer a program" (Interview, October 30, 1990). Rather, Peter's goal was to get to know the needs of his community of students and set motivating contexts, not to create program models. Peter didn't even keep files of teaching activities because the particular group of students shaped the activities and how they unfolded.

Peter explained that his curriculum arose out of the interaction of students with each other and with him. He said that he depended on the force of the classroom community to formulate the curriculum and to motivate the students. His curriculum was not the same as a "learner-centered" curriculum, which he associated with the 1960s; Peter found that philosophy inadequate since to him it carries the implication that teachers concern themselves only with individuals and not with the community as a whole. From Peter's point of view, the learner-centered curriculum does not incorporate the way teachers should provide for discussions, activities, and frequently writing which needs to emerge from interpersonal exchanges that are integral to the classroom culture.

In the end, these British teachers expected all of their students to master a variety of types of writing and to practice writing to a variety of audiences. If students did not practice and master certain types of writing, the teachers considered it their own failure in setting motivating contexts. This British approach provided a frame which allowed the students flexibility and gave the teachers important responsibilities. The approach also suggests a reason why in the questionnaires the British teachers focused on knowing their students. To set up their classrooms to accommodate this negotiated curriculum, the teachers had to know what would motivate each student, and they had to be able to track each student's progress. British teacher Fiona Rodgers explains that the teacher plays a directive role to ensure that students learn as well as are interested:

> It's not like ... within that negotiation there's complete anarchy ... There's a certain level of negotiation which is between them and myself about choosing something which, yes, is interesting, but also sometimes it's choosing something which will stretch them as learners. And so you're working together to develop and push them to higher standards and to produce better material and, and more interesting work.

Fiona and the other British teachers' sense of negotiation is related to what Flower describes when she discusses how student mentors negotiate meaning. However, the British teachers negotiate a curriculum with their students while Flower's mentors are mentally working out their ideas, dealing with conflicts in their reading and in their experiences. When one person negotiates with another, as Flower points out, the parties in the negotiation could be arbitrating a conflict or navigating a path. In the case of the British teachers, the metaphor of navigation seems most dominant. The teacher and students work together, collaboratively, and often with little conflict, to find "a best path." They acknowledge one another's varied values. The eventual path they navigate will reflect trade-offs and will result from a wrestling with varied priorities, but in the end, it will honor the teachers' and students' judgments of what is best. These studies, then, are probing the nature of the social interaction that leads to learning.

The U.S. exchange teachers did not adhere to a consistent approach but rather exhibited substantial variety in their interpretations of how theory enters practice. In two cases, the U.S. teachers expected everyone in the class to engage in the same teacher-assigned activities (or to choose from a set of

activities). In another case the teacher was attempting to move toward a completely individualized classroom in which she expected that each student would have a separate curriculum. In a final case the U.S. teacher followed a theory that involved negotiations with her students, similar to the British model. All of the U.S. teachers were involved in some negotiations with their students, but for some the degree was greater than for others. For example, when the focus was on teaching the whole class, there was little room for individual variation. When the goal was to move to a situation in which individual variation was the expected norm and in which the individual rather than the group was the focus, there was much room for individual variation but less of a sense of the role of community. In the final case, which was most like the British version, the teacher involved the whole class, and the force of the community was expected to serve as a motivator. Also, the expectation was present that individuals might, at times, need to reshape their own activities but that this would not be the norm.

When I began to study the dynamics in the exchange classrooms, I found that the application of Vygotsky's theory of social interaction for learning to write was subject to such varied interpretations that different theories seemed to underlie the practice of particular classrooms. Since Vygotsky's theoretical concepts provide the point of departure for many suggestions for practice in the professional literature, it became critical to understand the permutations of the application of the theory so that it would be possible to provide a clearer definition of the theory itself. In the end, Vygotsky's concept of social interaction proved much too general to account fully for the teaching and learning of writing, especially when the needs of diverse and mixed-ability learners had to be met. In the exchanges, most students were interacting and learning, but the depth of their involvement in pedagogical interactions varied and correspondingly the extent of their learning varied. The exchanges point out that social interaction is more than a binary feature, a yes/no proposition (either there's interaction or there isn't). Rather, the participants in any social interaction perch themselves at some point along a continuum of involvement—from highly involved to relatively uninvolved. In these writing exchanges, learners were perched at varied points on the continuum. For the same student, the perch sometimes shifted from one activity to the next. But the nature of the social space within the classroom also seemed to have general effects on the level of involvement of the group of students.

Some classroom spaces led to highly involved interactions for large numbers of students, whereas other spaces either promoted or allowed more room for surface interactions. In this study, the classrooms that led to the most highly involved interactions were those in which students participated most fully in curriculum-making and in which they felt that they were an integral part of a healthy and close-knit community. To create comfortable spaces for involvement in multiethnic classrooms, the teachers understood and paid explicit attention to the sociocultural mix of their students. For more detail on this project see *Exchanging Writing, Exchanging Cultures: Lessons in Reform from U.S. and British Schools.*

By 1990, my research, as well as the findings of a number of other Center projects (e.g., Dyson, Flower, Hull), led us at the Center to expand our notions of social processes and social interaction. We began giving greater consideration to the *cultural* meaning of the students experiences—cultural meanings related to the learner's social class, ethnicity, language background, family, neighborhood, gender. In addition, following the lead of Bakhtin, we began thinking of writing as participating in dialogues, with each voice shaped by particular social and cultural histories. By considering the intertwining of social and cultural processes in these ways, we developed a *sociocultural* frame that has provided a way to understand and analyze the diversity of resources students bring to the act of writing, the diversity of resources they encounter as they write, and their interactions with those resources. The resources include the writer's and readers' knowledge, expectations, motivations, the discourse communities to which they belong and the practices they control. Witte similarly argues for the importance of this cultural dimension in his discussion of the theoretical importance of joining the "textual, cognitive, and social dimensions of writing" (248).

With this theoretical frame in mind, Center researchers, as a group, now are focused on answering the following questions:

1. *ABOUT WRITING: What writing demands are made upon students in key educational, family, community, and workplace settings?*
   - What relationships exist between the writing practices of schools as compared to families, communities, and workplaces?
   - How do these writing practices both support and require higher-order thinking and learning across the curriculum and across the grades?

2. *ABOUT LEARNING: How do students meet these demands?*
   - What variation exists in students' ways of writing? How is this variation related to familial and community experiences? to language background?
   - How do students' ways of writing—their strategies—change over time? How do students adapt what they know and negotiate new literacy practices?
   - How does students' writing figure into the language life of these settings, that is, what is its interrelationship with students' ways of speaking? with their ways of reading? How do these interrelationships change over time?

3. *ABOUT INSTRUCTION: How do teachers help students meet these demands? How can student progress be measured?*
   - What challenges do teachers in varied settings face as they work amidst the diversity of literacy practices, of learners, and of technological tools? What is the nature of helpful teacher behavior in writing instruction across settings? What institutional supports are needed to support important instructional changes?
   - What instructional strategies promote both writing and learning across the curriculum and across the grades?
   - What purposes does writing assessment serve—at the level of the classroom, school, district, state, and nation? What is involved in creating assessments designed to fulfill varied purposes?
   - How does assessment influence instruction, both in terms of how and what students are taught and in terms of how the results affect the school site? How does writing assessment relate to the assessment of reading and oral language development?

(CSW Technical Report 1-B, pp. 2-3)

With this sociocognitive theory and its sociocultural framework in place, Elizabeth Simons, Alex Casareno, and I currently are working with 24 teachers to explore explicitly the dynamics of learning to write and writing to learn in urban multicultural classrooms. The project involves a national collaboration with teachers who work with us to conduct research in their own classrooms. The teacher researchers teach social studies and English in grades eight, nine, and ten. They come from four urban sites, representing different regions of the country: Boston, Chicago, New Orleans, and San Francisco. At each site there are six teacher-researchers who are themselves multi-ethnic. This project builds on the U.S./U.K. study. With a focus now on

multiple U.S. cities and with the collaboration of 24 teacher researchers, our goal is to deepen our understanding of teachers' theories and students' learning, from the teachers' points of view, as well as to explore the tensions teachers confront in their classrooms. Ultimately, we hope to move toward specific implications for practice.

This model for the coordination of teacher research and university research is designed to pull together knowledge from inside classrooms in ways that shed light on a pressing national problem—writing to learn and learning to write for urban youth in multicultural settings. The goal is to provide a national portrait of possibilities for Rose's "new invitations to literacy" in multicultural classrooms.

In the research on teaching writing in the United States and Great Britain, teachers collaborated in the design of the curriculum for the writing exchanges, but I designed the questionnaires and wrote the book about the project. This new project attempts another way of knowledge-making. Research questions focusing on teaching and learning in multicultural settings beg for insights from a mix of researchers with the capacity to understand the complexities of varied multicultural communities of learners. We designed a collaboration in which the university team and teachers presented a multicultural mix. The multicultural university team, with the help of local site coordinators, provided support for a multicultural group of teacher researchers throughout a year-long research process. The teachers, for the most part, are inexperienced in teacher research but are known for their thoughtfulness in the classroom and interest in issues surrounding multiculturalism and literacy. The university team provides a forum for the teachers to meet and reflect on these interests in some depth as well as to learn about teacher research. The teachers decided on their own questions; the university team helps them refine them. The university team also helped the teachers decide on what data to collect to answer their questions and helped them devise ways to analyze their data. The teachers are now answering their questions and writing reports. During the year, interaction has been frequent, both among the teachers and between the teachers and the local site coordinators and the Berkeley team.

The teacher researchers are still working on their research, and the university team, in addition to continuing to provide support for them, is beginning to synthesize the teachers' varied pieces of writing and their talk

together across the year. As we have begun to categorize the teachers' research questions, we are finding that their areas of focus are in themselves interesting. Many focus on issues of curriculum and classroom orientation:

- how to make issues of racism and conflicts about multiculturalism explicit in their classrooms:

> What happens when race, culture, and class become an on-going topic of discussion in my classroom? Deborah Juarez, San Francisco

- how to integrate attention to these issues with the subject areas they teach:

> In a multicultural African-American history class, what happens when students are given the opportunity to express their conflicts about multiculturalism and their own cultural identities in their journals? What kind of role does the teacher play? Brenda Landau, Chicago

- how a multicultural literature and social studies curriculum influences how students think about themselves, including the role writing plays in their conceptions of self:

> What kinds of conflicts do children from varied ethnic groups face in a multicultural high school setting? How can talk and writing in a multicultural Louisiana history curriculum contribute to their dealing with these conflicts? Reginald Galley, New Orleans

> What do students reveal in their writings and discussions when they are exposed to multicultural poetry? Pat Ward, New Orleans

- how to modify curriculum built for white middle class students to meet the needs of students in urban multicultural settings:

> What modifications do I have to make to a reading/writing workshop approach (Atwell, Reif) for an inner city, below-level English class? How will my approach affect the students' understandings of one another across cultures? How will it affect their writing across time? Kathy Daniels, Chicago

- how to address issues particular to non-native speakers of English:

> How can I help my students (who are non-native speakers of English) internalize correctness so that it becomes a part of their repertoire? Ann Lew, San Francisco

> What role does talk play as non-native speakers of English in my freshman *Introduction to High School English* class learn to write? Tom Daniels, Chicago

Other teachers felt the need to understand aspects of the students' lives, sometimes reaching outside the context of the classroom itself and beyond the literacy curriculum per se:

> What can we observe about the relationship between Black male students and the practices of White female teachers? Eileen Shakespear, Boston

> Why do some students excel while others don't, and what motivates students to read and write anyway? Sarah Herring, New Orleans

Others are dealing with the effects of school structures on their students' lives and on their learning:

> Why do so many Black males in the urban inner city who are competent individuals in the community end up in special needs classes? What's the effect on these students of being placed in LAB classes? James Williams, Boston

The teachers' answers to their questions address basic characteristics of the learning-to-write and writing-to-learn activities in these settings: the tensions these teachers experience as they attempt to create productive literacy activities and use literacy activities to improve learning; what they see as the literacy learning needs of their students, within and across cultural groups—considering needs as different as engaging with literacy, to learning grammar, to using literacy to learn; and how they document their students' progress.

Regardless of the kind of question the teacher poses, a key theme that has emerged in both the teachers' talk and their writing includes the importance of creating a "safe" environment in the classroom. What safety means varies according to the setting, but often creating a "safe" environment involves encouraging the students to take the "risks" that are necessary to learn to think independently and to speak honestly. Often the "safe" environment in the classroom contrasts with a violent environment on the surrounding streets. Part of creating a "safe" inside environment includes allowing in parts of that outside environment, and dealing openly with the tensions the students experience, including racial tensions that may surface in multicultural settings.

As we move into the 21st century, those of us in the area of literacy will likely continue to be faced with the challenge of how best to educate our diverse populations. The Center's sociocultural frame is proving particularly important in helping us understand the needs of ethnically and socioeconomically diverse populations of learners. It is pointing to ways we can specify how what Rose describes as the "painful but generative mix of language and story" can yield "new speech, new stories, and once we appreciate the richness of it, new invitations to literacy." I would like to end with a plea that the profession work together actively to meet Rose's challenge, using the multidisciplinary methods and the multiple research paradigms that have helped us advance our knowledge across the past several decades and listening carefully to the multiple voices of our students and our varied colleagues.

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The National Center for the Study of Writing, one of the national educational research centers sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Educational Research and Improvement, is located at the Graduate School of Education at the University of California at Berkeley, with a site at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. The Center provides leadership to elementary and secondary schools, colleges, and universities as they work to improve the teaching and learning of writing. The Center supports an extensive program of educational research and development in which some of the country's top language and literacy experts work to discover how the teaching and learning of writing can be improved, from the early years of schooling through adulthood. The Center's four major objectives are: (1) to create useful theories for the teaching and learning of writing; (2) to understand more fully the connections between writing and learning; (3) to provide a national focal point for writing research; and (4) to disseminate its results to American educators, policy-makers, and the public. Through its ongoing relationship with the National Writing Project, a network of expert teachers coordinated through Berkeley's Graduate School of Education, the Center involves classroom teachers in helping to shape the Center's research agenda and in making use of findings from the research. Underlying the Center's research effort is the belief that research both must move into the classroom and come from it; thus, the Center supports "practice-sensitive research" for "research-sensitive practice."

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